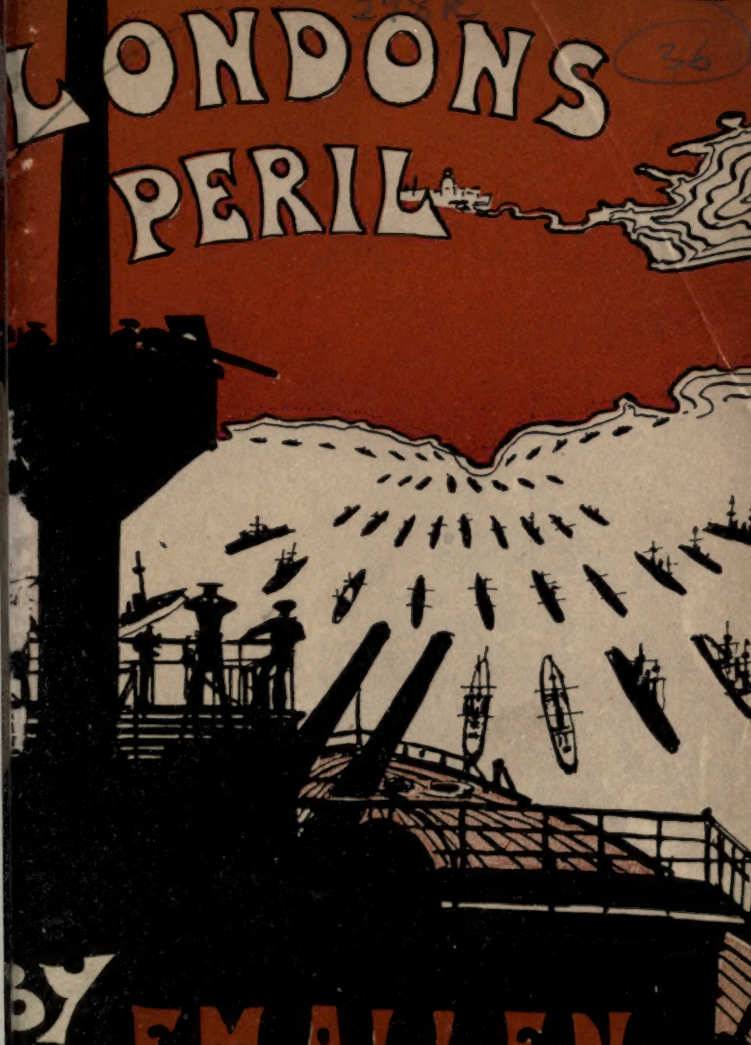
LONDONS PERIL



BY F M ALLEN

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F. M. ALLEN

LONDON
DOWNEY & CO. LIMITED
12 YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN

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I.

THE Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was in a particularly bland humour. Politically and personally he was for the moment at peace with all mankind.

He was seated in the library at his country house, a sheet of the *Times* perched awkwardly across his knees. It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon. He had paid a visit to his favourite greenhouse, and was gratified to find that his pet plants looked, if possible, more flourishing than usual. His letter-bag had been a lean one, and his principal correspondence had already been dictated to his secretary.

The library was a pleasant room, the sun was bright, and a gentle breeze mingled itself with the rays which danced in through the open window.

A knock disturbed the reverie of his lordship, and possibly ruffled the serenity of his temper.

The butler who entered saw the cloud on his master's brow, and his hard, expressionless face looked harder and more expressionless than ever as he crossed the room with feet that made no sound upon the floor.

The Secretary of State lazily took a visiting card off the salver and scrutinized it through his glasses.

"Oh, really, Jenkyns," said he petulantly, "this is too bad. You know I am not at home to anyone, and least of all to a lunatic. You had special warning about this very man."

"Yes, my lord," said the butler. "Special instructions *was* given about him, but he managed to get into the grounds somehow, and none of us liked to make a scene in the hall."

"But, surely," said his lordship, "he might have been got rid of without a scene. My orders might—really, they might—be carried out, under my own roof, at any rate."

"I interviewed the gent myself, my lord," said the butler, "and he persuaded me that your lordship would be highly pleased when he had a few moments with you."

"Well, upon my soul," said his lordship, relapsing into good humour, "this is vastly amusing. Very well, Jenkyns. As I do not

like to disappoint an old and valued servant, I will fall in with your views and see this"—he gazed at the visiting card again—"Monsieur Camille Dupont. But first send Mr. Treherne to me. I will ring when I am at Monsieur Dupont's disposal."

"I hope, my lord, you will not consider I took any liberties."

"I can hardly go so far as that," answered his lordship. "However, I will overlook your action this morning, but a repetition of similar conduct may be fraught with unpleasant consequences."

The butler bowed with special humility as he retreated. He was about the only man in the whole universe from whom the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs would tolerate a liberty. The sad-featured Jenkyns was well aware of this, and though he privately gloried in his unique privilege, he rarely exercised it.

"This mad Frenchman is in the house, and I have consented to give him a few minutes," said his lordship, as Mr. Treherne, his lordship's private secretary, entered the library.

"Monsieur Dupont!" exclaimed Mr. Treherne, drawing his brows together.

"Yes. No doubt you are surprised. So am I. But perhaps our interview may chase the

bee out of his bonnet. How did his letters strike you, Mr. Treherne?"

"They were certainly the letters of a gentleman," said the secretary. "But even gentlemen sometimes are crazed."

"I am aware that lunacy is not a special privilege of the lower orders," said his lordship. Mr. Treherne's cocksure manner sometimes irritated his chief. "You offered to see him, did you not?"

"Yes, sir. And he very politely declined the honour. He informed me that the communication he wished to make was for your lordship's ear only."

"He gave no clue to the nature of his disclosure?"

"No, sir. All he stated was that he had a secret which he considered to be the most important piece of information ever disclosed to a British Minister."

"I suppose he is a monomaniac, but at any rate he possesses the virtue—if it is a virtue—of perseverance. And his having got to the blind side of Jenkyns proves him to be a person of rare persuasiveness. Have you instituted inquiries about him?"

"Yes, sir. He arrived in London about six months ago, from France, and he has rented a

furnished house at Hampstead—a house at the north side of the Heath, with considerable grounds—rather an old-fashioned, out-of-the-way place. He keeps a small establishment, exclusively male. He is a bachelor. He lives very quietly. He does not entertain, and he pays his way regularly."

"There is some comfort in that. You are sure he has no connection with any of those cheap magazines or newspapers? You know how I abominate anything in the shape of an interviewer, or quasi-interviewer."

"He has no connection, so far as I have been able to ascertain, with any journal. No letters leave his house, and nothing, save circulars, arrive there."

"That will do, Mr. Treherne. Many thanks. Will you kindly be in the next room within easy reach of me. I will ring my gong if I require you."

When Mr. Treherne had retired, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs threw himself back in his chair and smiled. "I think it is the first time I have done a thing of this kind," he reflected. "I wonder if I am wise? . . . Bother that stupid Jenkyns!" he added half aloud, as he sat upright and stretched out his hand towards the button of the electric bell.

II.

THE man with the grey close-cropped beard and the dark moustache bowed as he entered the library, and advancing towards his lordship, he said, in an easy manner: "I have the honour, then, of addressing the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs? I need hardly ask the question. Your features, if I may say so without offence, my lord, are familiar to everyone who sees the illustrated papers."

"I suppose so," said his lordship, dryly. "Pray be seated, Monsieur. My time, I need hardly say, is valuable, and I can spare little of it. You have, I understand, some communication to make. Will you kindly be as brief as possible."

"As brief as your lordship may think fit," said M. Dupont. "I may say at once that my present disclosure can only touch the surface of the affair."

"Oh, dear me!" said his lordship, wearily.

"I am afraid, Monsieur, you will have to be satisfied with this interview."

"That shall be as your lordship pleases," said M. Dupont.

The Secretary of State had now scanned his visitor carefully. Dupont was a tall man, but a slight stoop took something from his height. He had a pair of keen dark eyes, his hair was grizzled and scant, his unshorn face colourless where the skin was visible, his black moustache stood out a little agressively, his brow was furrowed as if some great and long-standing trouble had oppressed him. His lordship was a keen judge of a man's age, but he could not satisfy himself as to the age of M. Camille Dupont. He might be forty, he might be sixty. Not a fool, certainly. A well-bred man, an educated man—he spoke English easily and correctly—a well-dressed man. Possibly a man of strong will, but not a dangerous or a cunning man, if expression counted for anything.

"And your business, Monsieur?" said his lordship, after a very brief pause.

"It is understood that we are speaking in absolute confidence?"

"If you wish it so."

"Then it is understood. The secret which I possess, and which I desire to sell," said

M. Dupont, "is known to very few, and to nobody else, in all human probability, who could or would impart it to your Government. If we come to terms, my life will not, it is possible, be a very valuable asset. Yet, I persuade myself that my countrymen will hereafter see that I acted in their interests. I am ready to disclose my secret to your lordship, and the price I shall ask will at least convince you that I consider my information to be, as I have already described it in my letters, the most important ever offered to the English Government."

"I am afraid," observed his lordship, "that you are somewhat slow in coming to the point. With what, or whom, is your secret concerned?"

"The seizure of London by France," said M. Dupont.

His lordship could not help laughing.

"I am afraid, Monsieur," said he, "that I cannot spare you any time to discuss a subject of this kind. The invasion of this country by the French is, humanly speaking, impossible; and even if it were possible, this country is perfectly capable of looking after itself."

"Will you excuse me for saying that such statements, my lord, are mere platitudes. One might expect to read such things in the news-

papers, but not to hear them from the lips of your lordship."

"Oh, come, Monsieur," said his lordship angrily, "I can hardly tolerate this kind of thing. I am afraid we have made two mistakes this morning: one, yours, in forcing yourself upon me; the other mine, in consenting to see you."

"Pray do not be so hasty with me, my lord," said M. Dupont, with an apologetic appeal of hands and eyes; "and do not dismiss me just yet. No doubt you consider it absurd to discuss such a subject with a stranger, especially one who has no credentials to produce."

"I am afraid so," said his lordship, making a motion to rise from his chair.

"Just a moment!" said M. Dupont. "It may clear the air if I say at once that the price of my secret is three millions of English sovereigns, and you will consider the price cheap when you know what I have to disclose."

His lordship's fingers were approaching the small gong on the table. His visitor observed this, and again smilingly begged his lordship not to terminate the interview, but to hear him for a few minutes further. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs consented, with a deprecatory movement of his hands and a careless nod of acquiescence.

"An invasion of the country by the French nation has always seemed to be something of what you call a bogey. Your fleet is capable, unless it is drawn away or destroyed, of repelling any attempt to land foreign troops upon your shores. The great Napoleon saw this. Every great French leader has been aware of this fact. Do not think, my lord, that I am wandering from the main point. I know well the difficulty of the task I have in hand when I attempt to explain myself without giving my secret away. I will only say that though I once was the hottest enthusiast upon the point, I have, since my residence in this country, grown cold and changed my mind; and my only desire now is to end the mischief, and to reimburse my colleagues for their enormous outlay. This I state in order to explain my cupidity to your lordship."

"This is rather tiresome, Monsieur," interrupted the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, taking out his watch.

"Unfortunately, I have to admit that it seems a waste of your lordship's time, but I assure you impressively, it is not so. Does your lordship remember the trial of Captain Dreyfus?"

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs nodded impatiently.

"You may then call to mind that there was at the time, in certain circles, a tremendous fuss lest some great secret should escape."

"There were so many secrets that one might be excused for being a little bewildered by them," said his lordship, a slight smile wrinkling his face.

"But you may remember that there was in certain quarters an inexplicable fear lest one secret, which would involve France with a foreign power, might, as you would say, crop up."

"I think I remember something of the kind—something about Germany. It seemed to me to be rather of the mountain-in-labour order. But, dear me, what has this got to do with the subject in hand? Shall we begin to discuss the Great Revolution, the Norman Conquest, or the Fall of Man?"

"None of the three. I will go back to the trial of Captain Dreyfus. The secret I hold was the secret which it was feared might leak out. It has not leaked out. It has nothing to do with any Continental power. It is the secret I am willing to sell your Government for three million pounds."

"On the part of my country, Monsieur, I must flatly decline to entertain your modest offer."

"A moment more, pray," said M. Dupont, eagerly. "If I could prove to you that suddenly without one word of warning—— But no!" he added quickly, "were I to finish my sentence I might give you a clue. Not, indeed, that any mere clue would be of much avail: nothing but exact information would be of any real value to you. Yet, I fear, I cannot speak further without encouragement."

"I beg of you not to entrust your secrets to me. I am not covetous of probing them," said his lordship. "I have no intention of using or following up any of your present communications. If I have been guilty of uttering platitudes, Monsieur, you may fairly be charged with indulging yourself with visions of things more suitable for the nursery than for the Cabinet."

"I do not indulge myself with any visions," said M. Dupont, "though I am of late oppressed by visions more terrible than those of De Quincey. I have spoken to you not of these, but of matters of vital and terrible moment—matters fraught with horrors for your country, and perhaps for mine." He rose as he spoke and placed the palm of his left hand upon his breast. "When you have made up your mind, my lord—and if you are wise you will make it up

quickly—that my secret is worth knowing and that my terms are reasonable, you can communicate with me. My address is in the corner of my card. Many thanks, my lord, for your condescension in receiving me, and for your patience with me. *Bon jour!*"

III.

THE Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was an omnivorous newspaper reader. When he had sufficient leisure he consumed even the Police Court reports, and endeavoured to interest himself in such correspondence as the silly season brings forth.

Three days after the visit from the Frenchman he found himself deep in the following paragraph :—

"Curious Police Raid.—A police raid of a character somewhat unusual was made yesterday upon 'The Birches,' a lonely residence situated between Blackheath and Eltham. It has been stated that the visit was made in consequence of some reports of 'The Birches' being a gambling resort; but this is hardly a satisfactory explanation, as, so far as we can learn, no visitors have ever been seen at 'The Birches.' The house—a picturesque old Georgian mansion—is occupied by a Mr. Thompson, who purchased the property some six months ago.

There is a rumour that some important documents concerning a proposed invasion of this country have been seized at 'The Birches.'"

His lordship touched the gong which stood on the small table at his elbow. In a few moments Mr. Treherne answered the summons.

"Have you seen this, or do you know anything about it?" asked his lordship, handing the newspaper to his private secretary and indicating the paragraph.

Mr. Treherne was a young man of the pushful and inquisitive kind. He had scented something peculiar in M. Camille Dupont, but he had failed to pump any information concerning the object of the visit out of his chief. His lordship had dismissed the matter by saying, "That French gentleman who has just taken his departure is, I am afraid, a very damp squib. Still, you might keep your eye upon him, Mr. Treherne. I hardly think he is mischievous, but one never knows."

The private secretary had kept his eye upon M. Dupont with a vengeance. He had ascertained that the Frenchman was the occasional occupier of "The Birches," and that he appeared at his Blackheath residence as plain Mr. Thompson. Mr. Treherne shrewdly concluded that the address given on M. Dupont's visiting card

was not likely to be the place where valuable secret documents would be kept. Then a resistance might possibly be made at "Heathview," as there were some men servants in that residence, whereas "The Birches" had only an elderly housekeeper, a Frenchwoman, and a young lady, supposed to be Mr. Thompson's niece.

Mr. Treherne considered the raid (instigated by him) had been splendidly successful. He well knew the horror his chief possessed of getting mixed up in a petty affair, but this was an affair of magnitude. Therefore when he was asked about the newspaper paragraph he replied with a touch of the pride which apes humility:

"I think I may say I had some hand in this matter, sir."

"Then I wish to goodness you would not display so much zeal, sir," said his lordship angrily. "It is a very good quality in its place, but you know how I detest this kind of peeping-Tom business."

"There are, perhaps, occasions, sir—" began Mr. Treherne.

"No, sir," interrupted his lordship with rising temper; "there are no occasions when my private secretary should in any way be mixed up with a police raid. I fear, Mr. Treherne,

your sojourn in Paris has infected you with Gallic views of diplomatic life. I hate all forms of *espionage*. Once a matter of the kind falls into the hands of detectives it is hopelessly vulgarized."

"Documents of considerable importance have been seized at 'The Birches,'" said Mr. Treherne, meekly. "I was about to lay some of them, or the gist of some of them, before your lordship to-day. They are a bit confusing, but I have been doing my best to put them into shape."

"What are they concerned with, these precious documents?" said his lordship, absent-mindedly.

"With a projected invasion of these islands, sir."

"Of course, I had forgotten. But surely, Mr. Treherne, you do not expect me to investigate all sorts and conditions of foolishness. Suppose, in order to hasten the hours of a dull afternoon, we consider China—from a geological or æsthetical point of view—or the social condition of the Isle of Man, or some other sensible and informing subject. Really, I am tired of this French invasion business; the only man who might have accomplished the deed was Buonaparte."

"What Buonaparte might have done, another Frenchman may do," observed Mr. Treherne.

"Oh, dear no!" said his lordship. "They don't breed Corsican Ogres every day. I have been re-reading Doctor Barry O'Meara's 'Napoleon in Exile.' The book is on the table there. I was refreshing myself with the Ogre's views on China. He was a remarkably shrewd man, with all his faults. He declares that if he were an Englishman he would esteem the man who advised a war with China to be the greatest enemy England possessed. We should be beaten in the end, in his opinion, and perhaps risk a revolution in India. It is also curious to note that he thought Russia would one day attack India from the Caspian Sea. Times are changed since he spoke, but much of his views on far Cathay and on our nearer neighbour, Russia, hold good to-day. However, this is wandering from our theme. Just see what he says about his scheme for the invasion of England. Probably you have, like myself, forgotten. Never be afraid to admit forgetfulness or ignorance, Mr. Treherne, but endeavour not to be either forgetful or ignorant. You might read it aloud to me—my eyes are weak this morning. Page 349 of the first volume, I think."

The Private Secretary took up the volume, while his chief settled himself more comfortably in his chair. He found page 349 quickly.

"'I then asked Napoleon' (he read) 'if he had really intended to invade England, and if so, what were his plans. He replied, "I would have headed it myself."'"

"I presume he meant the expedition by 'it.' Very loose writing. Go on, Mr. Treherne."

"'I had given orders for two fleets to proceed to the West Indies; instead of remaining there, they were merely to show themselves amongst the islands—'"

"Mere pantomime tricks," growled his lordship.

"'—and return directly to Europe, raise the blockade of Ferrol, take the ships out, proceed to Brest, where there were about forty sail of the line, unite and sail to the Channel, where they could not have met with anything strong enough to engage them, and clear it of all English men-of-war.'"

"Just as he had forgotten that it snowed in Russia," said his lordship, "he evidently forgot that wind and weather would not necessarily favour him in these wild-cat schemes. Indeed, with the example behind him of the Armada, and of the French fleet on the west coast of Ireland a century ago, he might almost have

counted upon Providence supplying England with the necessary adverse gales."

"'By false intelligence,'" continued the private secretary, "'adroitly managed, I calculated you would have sent squadrons to the East and West Indies and the Mediterranean in search of my fleets.'"

"I can hardly believe he was in earnest when he said this," interrupted his lordship. "False intelligence employed in big schemes is the worst—because it is the most stupid—kind of labour in vain. Well, Mr. Treherne?"

"'Before they could return, I would have had the command of the Channel for two months, as I should have had about seventy sail of the line, besides frigates. I would have hastened over my flotilla with two hundred thousand men, landed as near Chatham as possible, and proceeded direct to London, where I calculated to arrive on four days from the time of my landing.'"

"He had no South Coast Railways to deal with, recollect," said his lordship grimly.

"'I would have proclaimed a Republic (I was First Consul then), the abolition of the nobility and House of Peers—'"

"It makes a poor peer tremble in his shoes," grunted his lordship.

"'—the distribution of such of the latter as opposed me amongst my partisans—liberty, equality, and the sovereignty of the people.'"

"A sovereignty the people don't care a tupenny damn about, to use a naughty word accredited to the Iron Duke," said his lordship.

"'I would have allowed the House of Commons to remain, but would have introduced a great reform.'"

"I wish the latter part of the programme could be carried out to-day," murmured his lordship.

"'I would have published a proclamation declaring that we came as friends of the English—'"

"'*Timeo Danaos*,'" said his lordship.

"'—and to free the nation from a corrupt and flagitious aristocracy—'"

"Mercy upon us!"

"'—and restore a popular form of government, a democracy; all of which would have been confirmed by the conduct of my army, as I would not have allowed the slightest outrage to be committed by my troops. Marauding or ill-treating the inhabitants, or the most trifling infringement of my orders, I would have punished with instant death. I think that with my promises, together with what I would

actually have effected, I should have had the support of a great many. In a large city like London, where there are so many *canaille* and so many disaffected, I should have been joined by a formidable body.'"

"There is something in that," said his lordship, "but not so much as Napoleon seemed to think. In fact, I doubt if he thought it. He ignores the fact that there has always been a strong patriotic spirit, active or dormant, in the vast majority of Englishmen, rich and poor, and I would be inclined to pity the *canaille* who flocked to his standard, or the standard to which they flocked. Well, Mr. Treherne?"

"'I would at the same time have excited an insurrection in Ireland.'"

"Not a difficult task, I should be inclined to think," said his lordship; "but he had got to get to Ireland first, and twin-screws and turbines were not in play in the early days of the nineteenth century."

"'I observed (Dr. O'Meara continues) that his army would have been destroyed piecemeal, that he would have had a million men in arms against him in a short time, and moreover that the English would have burnt London rather than have suffered it to fall into his hands. 'No, no!' said Napoleon, 'I do not

believe it. You are too rich and too fond of money. A nation will not so readily burn its capital.'"

"A wonder the words didn't burn his tongue!" observed his lordship. "Had he forgotten Moscow?"

"'How often have the Parisians sworn to bury themselves in the ruins of their capital (continues Napoleon) rather than suffer it to fall into the hands of the enemies of France, and yet twice it has been taken. There is no knowing what would have happened, Mr. Doctor. Neither Pitt nor you nor I could have foretold what would have been the result.'"

"I expect, after all," said his lordship, "his scheme of invasion was merely a bogey. The idea of a man of Buonaparte's character saying, 'There is no knowing what would have happened!' It shows he hadn't fixed his intellect on that plan of invasion. It was merely one of his dreams, like that of his menacing Europe with a horde of Asiatics, or of his making an amalgam of Rome and Paris; he says somewhere that he had an idea of making the Pope his almoner, and Paris the capital of the Christian world. I expect he said these things with his tongue in his cheek. But pray continue!"

"'The hope of a change for the better, and of a division of property, would have operated wonderfully amongst the *canaille*, especially that of London. The *canaille*—'"

"Oh, bother his *canaille!* One would think it was a report of the Dreyfus trial."

"'The *canaille* of all rich nations is alike. I would have made such promises as would have had a great effect. What resistance could an undisciplined army make in a country like England, abounding in plains?'"

"There are some hills on the way from Chatham, and 'there are milestones on the Dover Road.' He should have lived to have read some account of the war in South Africa," said his lordship. "That will do for the present, Mr. Treherne."

"I observe, sir," said the Private Secretary, turning over a page, "that Napoleon had not forgotten Moscow, and also that he goes so far as to admit that there is a stronger national spirit in England than in France. His sole idea apparently was that if he had possession of London the whole country would be in the hollow of his hand."

"A very stupid idea, in my opinion," said his lordship, "though I freely admit I should not care to see 200,000 French troops inside

the four mile radius. I am now convinced that the hero of Austerlitz never seriously meant to wear the laurels of Chatham or Dover on his brow."

"It is odd," said Mr. Treherne in a bolder tone than he had previously assumed, "that the recent plans for the invasion of this country—I mean those discovered at Blackheath—are very much on a line, taking the march of events into account, with Napoleon's plans."

"That is not surprising," said his lordship, languidly. "Indeed, it is like somebody's cocoa—grateful, comforting."

"It might interest your lordship to know that the occupier of 'The Birches' at Blackheath is one and the same person as the occupier of 'Heathview' on Hampstead Heath."

"Monsieur Camille Dupont?"

"Yes, sir—under the name, of course, of Thompson."

"You say you have been scrutinizing those plans?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me see what they look like."

"Certainly, sir," said Mr. Treherne, rising, a quiet gleam of triumph in his eyes.

IV.

"I DO not think the plans of our friend, Mr. Dupont, are so very formidable," said the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs about an hour later. "I have looked through all your notes, Mr. Treherne, and I confess I see nothing very new in the scheme, and nothing very alarming. I should be inclined to think that the plans are mainly extracts from some bellicose French journal, or that they are, if there is any scheme in the air, deliberately intended to deceive us."

"I can hardly think they were intended to fall into our hands, sir. Much pains were taken to conceal the text—the cipher is a very difficult one."

"Yet you mastered it. No, Mr. Treherne. Bear in mind Buonaparte's words about false intelligence adroitly managed."

"You must recollect, sir, that Monsieur Dupont took a good deal of trouble to conceal his identity with that of Mr. Thompson."

"His adroitness, possibly—that is if, I repeat, there is any scheme at all on foot. The whole thing savours of melodrama. I would not have allowed myself to have a spark of interest in the matter only for the visit of Monsieur Dupont. He gave me the impression of being a serious and an anxious person, but he may only be, in spite of his countenance, a very cunning lunatic, or a plausible swindler."

"He has some information to sell, I presume," ventured Mr. Treherne.

"Yes. That is so."

"And may I ask, sir, if his information, assuming it to be true, was worth acquiring?"

"It was too vague, and I did not care to burden myself with *un secret de Polichinelle*, or a new 'Arabian Nights' tale."

"Might I ask your lordship if Monsieur Dupont's information has any direct bearing upon the plans seized by the police, or any connection with them?"

"I am afraid," answered his lordship with a smile, "you ask me too much. I gave my word to our French friend that I would consider his communication as for my ears alone, if I was not prepared to deal with him on the purchase system. Let us look into those plans once more, or rather into your notes of them."

"In the first place, we have elaborate and correct charts of the coasts of Great Britain and Ireland," said Mr. Treherne, consulting the bundle of memoranda he had placed on the table a short time previously, "with full and accurate details of the strength and nature of our defences, and of everything concerning the navigation of various important harbours. Some of this information could not have been procured from any source open to the general public, and it is very disconcerting to find that strangers are in possession of details which we considered strictly private, and at any rate impossible to be grouped together."

"The French have a knack for doing this kind of thing. Possibly you will find that much of this information possessed by our friend Monsieur Dupont is 'false intelligence, adroitly managed.' I like the phrase," said his lordship, parenthetically.

"Very little of it, so far as I can judge, sir. I have gone through much of it with Admiralty experts, not one of whom could find a flaw in such portions as he was acquainted with, and none of whom could of himself have pieced the Frenchman's information together."

"You have been busy, then, Mr. Treherne."

"I have been anxious, sir."

"I warned you about the pitfalls which zeal may lead to. But what more?"

"Then, sir, you see we have in these plans certain statements as to French long-range guns of which we knew nothing previously."

"They may exist only in Monsieur Dupont's lively imagination."

"No doubt, sir, but his information has a plausible air about it. The whole plan indeed has. There is the combined attack on Leith, on Hull, on some part of the south or south-east coast which I cannot decipher—it is not Dover, nor Folkestone, nor the Thames, nor Portsmouth—and upon the south-west coast of Ireland. Either Queenstown or Bantry Bay is indicated, but it is not definitely stated where the contemplated Irish landing is to be made."

"You take it very seriously, Mr. Treherne."

"I am sorry, sir, that you do not think I am justified in doing so. Then there is, as I read the cipher, one curious sentence:—'*Thus, while the limbs are being attacked, and while the enemy is engaged in repelling these attacks, the great "coup" can be dealt: it will paralyze the heart.*'"

"Very French, I must say! Why a conspirator writing in cipher should indulge himself with cheap rhetoric is one of the things that puzzles me!"

"What occurs to me, your lordship, is that this man has been entrusted with the administering of the *coup* which is to paralyze the heart of England, and I take it that this means some sudden and unexpected dash upon London."

"You cannot pitch a man across the Channel as you pitch a shell. I do not believe that you could induce any considerable portion of the French army to entrust themselves to one of those cisterns which an ingenious novelist suggests the inhabitants of Mars are fashioning for the purpose of making a raid upon this planet. From the nearest point on the French coast to London there exists, say, eighty to ninety miles of sea and land. This has to be traversed. Granting, for the sake of argument, that our fleet was not available, or even that it was destroyed, that Dover and Folkestone had been reduced to ashes by the French, and that the sea journey was accomplished without serious damage to the Gallic stomach, do you really consider it within the limits of possibility to plant, say (again, for the sake of argument), half a million French soldiers in the heart of London before we could draw a sword or fire a gun? Recollect, the great Napoleon allowed himself four days to get 200,000 men from Chatham. There was then (in his mind) no

gigantic obstacle to locomotion, such as, for example, the South Coast Railways. Do you think any South Coast line would convey half a million passengers to London in a week?"

"You will have your joke, sir, but I should very much like to know what Monsieur Dupont has in store for us, or even what he thinks he has in store for us."

"Your curiosity may be satisfied within the next hour."

"How, sir? if I may presume to ask the question."

"Largely owing to your zeal, Mr. Treherne. I had early this morning a note, delivered here by a messenger, from our French conspirator, in which he accuses me of breach of faith with him. He believed I had instigated the raid upon him at Blackheath. In fact he makes me think of myself in the light of a possible Dick Turpin, or whatever famous highwayman used to make a happy hunting ground of Blackheath. His upbraiding of me is, I must admit, couched in polite language. I felt nettled that he should think I had broken my implied word of honour; and I consented to see him again to-day—letters are dangerous things; I could not trust any sort of explanation to paper."

The Private Secretary was considerably

agitated by his lordship's words. He felt that even in a matter of comparatively so small a kind he was no match (as he sometimes fondly hoped he was) in diplomacy for his chief. His lordship, from under the shadow of his rugged brows, gazed for a moment at the abashed secretary. Then lifting his head and consulting his watch, he said:

"Monsieur Dupont's hour has arrived. I am certain he will be punctual. If you will kindly be at hand, I will summon you should I require you. You might restore 'Napoleon in Exile' to its place in that shelf yonder, and you had better take your papers and all vestiges of them with you. I think I have digested them."

V.

WHEN M. Dupont had taken a seat in the library, his host at once opened the ball.

"You are mistaken, Monsieur," said he, "in your assumption that I had any act or part in the raid upon your house. What passed between you and me at our previous interview has not in any way been disclosed to anyone. I have, however, just ascertained that the raid was instigated by a servant of mine, who is also, please to remember, a servant of the State. He acted upon his own initiative. Had he consulted me, you would have been untouched. I hope this perfectly frank statement is satisfactory?"

"Absolutely, my lord," said M. Dupont. "It is very generous of you to treat me so fairly, and I will be equally frank with you. I had a very poor opinion of the acuteness of your police, and I considered the precautions I had taken to conceal my identity at the house at Blackheath were sufficient. I am chagrined to know that I

have been over-matched. I at once admit your right to make a search—it is part of the game. I have played my cards badly. That is all."

"I am glad the air has been cleared so quickly," said his lordship.

"Certain of our papers are in your possession, I presume?"

"They are in the possession of my secretary. I do not lay any claim to them. In fact, in visiting me and in offering to sell me some secret you are acting wholly in error as to the manner in which such negotiations should be conducted."

"I am ignoring such a trifle as etiquette, my lord. It does not agitate me. The matter in hand is too big for such concernings. I addressed myself to you, knowing you to be the minister who is chiefly in touch with the subject, and believing you to be an honourable gentleman. Has your lordship since considered my proposal?"

"Candidly, until I received your note this morning I had not given a thought to it."

"And since then?"

"I have been posted up in the plans of the scheme, and I have been studying the *obiter dicta* of a distinguished countryman of yours—Buonaparte. I am glad to say I cannot come to

any conclusion except the one—that any information you might be willing to sell to the State would be of no value to the State."

"No doubt, my lord, you consider your coast safe because your fleet is invincible; but please to remember I did not propose to disclose any secrets as to naval movements. I am not concerned with them. What I am concerned with is much more deadly and much more certain."

"This paralyzing of the heart of England—the blow at London," said his lordship, smiling.

"Precisely. I have told you, my lord, that I was at one time an enthusiast about the scheme, but that I had changed my mind. I consider the interests of France can be better served than by carrying out a project for the paralyzing of England. I am willing to be a seeming traitor now. If I disclose my secret, France as well as England will be saved from much that is evil. My colleagues will lose nothing but the overthrow of a great plan. They will be chagrined, furious—but what of that? I have my views concerning other and better projects for France—if I survive. You will find my price cheap. . . . Do I utterly fail to convince you that I am in deadly earnest?"

"My dear Monsieur Dupont, no revelation dealing with the movements of a rival State or

of a disaffected colony was ever worth more to us than a small secret service pension or a burdensome title. Even these things I cannot offer you."

"You would jest with me, my lord."

"Not offensively, I hope, Monsieur."

"You think, no doubt, I am some fanatic. Yet I tell you that my secret—which you cannot discover except from my lips—is worth many war-ships."

"I have not sought your confidence, Monsieur. And when a man declines absolutely to buy an article, the seller should be reasonable enough not to press his wares further."

"But your lordship does not realize, it is plain, the value of the article I have for disposal. And its value, alas! can be appreciated only by yourself. If I speak, the accuracy of my words can be easily tested. Shall I put my cards upon the table and take your lordship upon honour—that if my information is worth my price, you will pay that price?"

"Certainly not, my dear sir. I could not make you any such promise even if I desired to do so. The nation's funds are not at the disposal of any individual."

"There is a Secret Service Fund—you alluded to it."

"I could not answer for it. And your price is—pray do not be offended—absolutely preposterous."

"Will you be the judge of that?"

"I could not be. I might, as a private individual, be prepared to pay a small sum for your information—it could only be a small sum—through sheer personal curiosity."

"No use, my lord! With my information in your possession you would be compelled to reveal my secret—you would find its value and importance to your State overwhelming."

"My dear sir, are we not frittering away much time? I have given you my opinion as to the value of revelations."

"But if I could demonstrate to you, as I can," cried M. Dupont, with a gurgling sound in his throat, "that without one word of warning, or the possibility of oneblow being struck back, half a million of picked French troops could appear in London, would you not consider that my price was small if I enabled you at one move to destroy the project?" He leaned forward as he spoke, his eyes seeming to stand out from their sockets.

"Why waste words in a discussion of the impossible?"

"I do not propose any discussion, my lord. . . .

But I see my words do not carry themselves with sufficient force. I am weary of this."

The bump of curiosity was not largely developed with the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. He experienced a sense almost of surprise that he should find himself, as he did, anxious to know what the Frenchman had to reveal. But he could not even pretend to make terms with his visitor. Each man saw that further parley was useless, and for some minutes both were silent. The silence was broken by his lordship.

"It is my luncheon hour, Monsieur," he said. "I am lunching almost alone to-day—no one but my private secretary. You have come a long way. Will you join us at luncheon? I do not heed the risk of being accused of entertaining conspirators against the State," he said with a smile, as he rose from his seat. "Perhaps I might compromise you!" he added suddenly, a humorous twinkle in his eyes. "We are, I assure you, discreet people here. The most persevering of newspaper men has never yet succeeded in bearding me at the luncheon table."

The situation appealed to the humour of his lordship, but M. Dupont politely declined the hospitality offered. His face wore an expression of acute disappointment—almost of anguish—as he left the room.

VI.

AFTER leaving his lordship's residence, M. Dupont set out by a circuitous route for Blackheath. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon when he reached "The Birches." He was very weary in mind and body.

The young lady of the house (who, as the newspapers surmised, was his niece), after welcoming her uncle, showed plainly that she was suffering much anxiety on his account. M. Dupont quickly noticed her anxious air, and endeavoured to reassure her.

Marguerite Dupont had of late cause to be much distressed about her uncle. She had known him intimately from infancy, and until recently she had no memory of him save as a sprightly, dashing man of the world, full of gaiety and good nature. About two months after their arrival at "The Birches"—Marguerite had in the beginning been informed that for certain political reasons it was advisable for her

uncle to live for a time in England under an assumed name—he had left Blackheath for the Continent in perfect health and in high spirits. A few weeks later he returned, the wreck of his former self—aged beyond belief, broken in health, bankrupt in spirits. That some great grief or disaster had overwhelmed him was obvious. He offered no explanation to his niece, and she asked for none. In everything, except in his love for Marguerite, M. Dupont was a wholly changed man. He who had been the brightest and gayest of mortals, and who had feared no man, moved furtively about, seeming to avoid the gaze of everybody. He had by slow degrees shaken off some of the traces of terror which had metamorphosed him, but Marguerite was convinced that her uncle's health and courage had left him never to return.

Dinner passed over in silence, and after the meal M. Dupont accompanied his niece to the drawing-room. She played and sang softly for him, but he seemed to have lost his old interest in her music. After they had been about an hour in the drawing-room, M. Dupont beckoned Marguerite, and she promptly flew to him, and throwing herself on a stool near him, leant her young head against her knees.

"My dear," he said, stroking her hair, "I am about to confide in you—to ask your advice on a momentous point. Pray do not be startled!"

The young girl trembled with anxiety and fear. This mood of her uncle's was new to her. He had never before spoken of his affairs. She knew he was an engineer, and understood he was highly esteemed in his profession, but she had rarely met any of his professional friends, and knew nothing concerning any of his various undertakings.

"You may remember I left here about four months ago for France. I was then engaged in a work—I am still connected with it—which involved, among other things, much underground labour—mining, to be precise. In addition to being the chief engineer engaged in carrying out the work, I had the charge laid upon me of seeing that all our operations were conducted in absolute secrecy. One day I was examining the—what shall I call it to make it intelligible to you—a shaft, or rather a cutting branching from it, when a terrible disaster occurred. . . . It horrifies me still when I think of it," he continued, with a shiver. . . . "There was a large body of workmen close to me. I had been informed that our great enemy—water—was percolating through the roof, and

I was engaged in making an examination of the place when, with no warning save a quick and sickening tremor, the floor seemed to rise to the roof. I remember well the swift vibration, and then the thunderous roar like the sound of the sea bursting through a cave: then my consciousness went. I awoke in darkness, such darkness!" he moaned, "and for a long time I lay without attempting to move. My head burned and throbbed . . . . I will not inflict upon you, my dearest child, an account of my feelings and sensations. No words of mine could describe them.

"After a time—I do not know how long—I tried to move. I was stiff all over, but I could not find any broken bones or any wounds of consequence. Then I suddenly bethought me of my companions. I groped about in the awful darkness, and soon my hand touched the body of a man. He was cold—dead. I groped and burrowed amongst the *débris* by which I was surrounded, and found many more of my companions—all dead. So far as I could judge I was the only survivor.

"I had no means of ascertaining the extent of the disaster. The passage-way in which I lay extended in each direction for many miles. It was quite possible that weeks, months, nay,

years might elapse before the disaster could be repaired. I suffered agonies from thirst, and yet the sound of a drop of water falling from the roof would have driven me mad with added terror. I do not realize yet how I lived and struggled through the first few hours, but the sense of life was strong in me. I even found myself wondering how it was that I was not oppressed by want of air. I knew there was no time to be lost if I was to attempt to save myself. I soon discovered that in one direction the tunnel in which I was buried alive was blocked—in the opposite direction there was nothing but loose *débris* to bar my path.

"I set out—fortunately there was no difficulty in standing upright. Occasionally I encountered more *débris*, further evidence of a disaster to the structure—I now know that the cause was a slight shock of earthquake—and I had to tear great stones away with might and main. In many places my head struck the roof. Often I found the way so broken and heaped up that I had to crawl, like the abhorred serpent, through hideous gaps and holes. My clothes were torn into shreds: my flesh lacerated and gory. Sometimes I was stunned: sometimes I rushed blindly on, heedless of my battered head. Now and then I stumbled over

bodies—men—all cold—some horribly mangled. And after passing my hand over their bodies, I would rush along again shouting and screaming deliriously. And the darkness was over everything, and the sense of suffocation and the burning thirst. . . . I frighten you, my child. Oh, what a memory!

"At last—I will not harrow you further, my dear—I came to a shaft, or rather a great hole in the earth, and standing at the bottom and looking upwards I saw one star in the sky. Oh, blessed star!" exclaimed M. Dupont, casting his eyes upwards. "I was free! I had escaped from the charnel-house—the pit—the horror unspeakable!

"Then, when I cooled a little, I marvelled. I knew every inch of the tunnel in which I had travelled. The shaft at the bottom of which I stood was no part of my work. . . . But this is by the way. I will tell you later what this strange shaft was: the story of it is very curious. It is sufficient to say now that I escaped.

"It was many days before I returned home. When I saw you again, Marguerite, I feared, my child, that I was for ever a broken man. I tried to hide my terrors from you. I endeavoured to hug myself with the hope that

in a short time I should be quite well again. I wrote to my friends in France and told them so. Some saw me—some who knew me well—and they believed I should be restored to health again. Meanwhile that awful passage has never been out of my mind. It haunts me by day and night. I have begun to regard my work as a hellish work. I feel I shall grow young again if—it is a large 'if'—only I can blot it from my memory.

"Marguerite!" he added almost fiercely, after a brief pause, "you have known your uncle ever since you were a little child, when I took you from your dying mother's arms. Have you ever heard one word of mine, or witnessed one act, that would cause you to think I could be a traitor to France? . . . My country—my beloved!"

With a quick sob his head fell back in his chair, and Marguerite, wildly alarmed, started to her feet, to find that her uncle was staring at the ceiling with wild, unmeaning eyes, and that his features were distorted by some hideous convulsion.

VII.

THE doctor summoned by M. Dupont's elderly housekeeper to "The Birches" gave no hope. He pronounced the case to be one of acute paralysis. He asked if Mr. Thompson had received any great and sudden shock. Marguerite, who spoke English fairly well, answered the doctor wildly. The tale which her uncle had told her, and the suddenness of the seizure following his recital, had given her a violent shock. The doctor pitied the young girl, and did not torment her with fruitless inquiries. He appealed to the housekeeper, but here a difficulty of language arose. The old woman could not speak English, and the doctor was by no means a proficient in the French tongue. However, he succeeded in conveying to the old woman that the young girl was for the moment more in need of care than the master of the house—that much would have

to be done in order to pull Marguerite round an ugly corner, and that little or nothing could be done for Mr. Thompson. In all human probability he would die during the night without regaining consciousness. Were there any relations or friends to be communicated with? The old woman knew of none. There might be some distant relatives in France and many friends, but she had no addresses. There were in England neither relatives nor friends of Mr. Thompson.

The housekeeper at "The Birches" was a person of some discretion. She had been in M. Dupont's service for many years, and was well aware that her dying master's name was not Thompson, but she saw no reason for imparting this fact to the doctor.

Who was to look after the stricken man? The housekeeper at once declared the duty to be hers, and the doctor agreed to this, with the understanding that the lady of the house should not be forgotten. "She can hardly be left to herself in this lonely house," he explained to the old woman, "and in this out-of-the-way place I presume it will not be an easy matter to get additional help quickly." The physician was convinced that Mr. Thompson's hours were numbered, that it was impossible he should

rally. Probably he might have another seizure, and then there would be the end. The only plan that suggested itself to him was that he should procure a nurse as quickly as possible and send her on to "The Birches," and that in the meantime the two women should watch the patient in turns. He saw at a glance that the housekeeper was a person of considerable shrewdness.

On leaving the house about half-past eight o'clock, he was relieved to find that Mademoiselle had rallied, but he feared she might collapse utterly if any new strain was put upon her. He informed the young girl that he would return before ten o'clock, and that if a nurse could be procured by him she would probably arrive at "The Birches" before he returned. He knew, he said, a good nurse in the neighbourhood who was, he believed, disengaged. Marguerite thanked him, and assured him that she felt she would be able to bear up with courage.

About a quarter of an hour after the doctor's departure, the hall-door bell was rung. On answering the ring, the houskeeper, leaving her young mistress in charge of the patient, found at the door a tall, soldierly-looking man. The old woman fancied she recognized the stranger,

but she could not recall his name. He addressed her in French, and declared he had business of most pressing moment with Mr. Thompson. It was explained to him that Mr. Thompson was dangerously ill—that he had had sudden paralytic seizure, and he was not expected to live through the night.

"Is this true?" demanded the stranger sternly.

"Perfectly true, sir," the old woman replied.

The stranger heaved a deep sigh. "I must see Miss Marguerite, then," he said. "Say Major Xavier requests an audience of her."

The housekeeper could see no reason for refusing to convey the message to her young mistress. She invited the stranger to enter, and ushered him into the library. The announcement to Marguerite of the stranger's arrival aroused the young girl. She started on hearing the name, and clapping her hands, said:

"My uncle's best friend! I will see him by all means."

Major Xavier shook hands silently with Marguerite. "Is this bad news I hear true?" he asked. "Is your uncle mortally ill?"

"I fear so," said the young girl. "The doctor will be here again in about an hour."

"I shall wait until he arrives," said Major Xavier, "if I may."

Marguerite had entered the library with a sense of relief at knowing that one of her uncle's most intimate friends was at hand, but the expression on Major Xavier's face boded, she quickly saw, no good: evil tidings was written there plainly.

"This seizure is not many hours old, I understand," said the Major after a short, awkward pause.

"It occurred about half-past seven o'clock."

"He had shown no signs previously of—pardon me for saying it, Mademoiselle—anything being wrong here?" touching his forehead.

"Oh, no sign whatever! He has been ill—perhaps you know it—for months."

"Alas! only too well do I know it; yet, dolt that I am, I was the one who decided that his reason, his intellect, was intact."

"And so it was."

"It cannot have been, Mademoiselle."

"Who should know better than I, Monsieur le Major?" said Marguerite with some asperity.

"His own recent action has proved the fact beyond yea or nay."

"Nevertheless, he was perfectly sound of

mind until the sudden seizure this evening," persisted Marguerite. "He was then telling me something—and he spoke most lucidly—of his recent terrible accident."

"Pray, Mademoiselle, what do you know of his plans?—of the work upon which he is engaged?"

"Nothing, Monsieur."

"You say this upon your honour?"

"A woman is always on her honour."

"Not at all, Mademoiselle. You are too young. It seems unmanly to contradict you, or to cross-examine you; yet I have no choice. Pray forgive me for speaking with harshness to you at such a time, but I am terribly wrought upon, my child. You have no knowledge of the task your uncle has been occupied upon for years? Be frank with me!"

"No knowledge, Major; beyond the belief—arrived at I know not how—that the work was one of great magnitude; and as my uncle is an engineer, I concluded he was engaged upon some great engineering project. He spoke to me only this evening of some mining operations. That is all I know."

"He has seen no strange visitors—English, I mean—here recently?"

"None, Monsieur. Though I should mention

that some police agents visited the house in his absence yesterday."

"Well?" said the Major, eagerly. "I had not heard of this before."

"They forced their way into this room. They begged me not to be uneasy. They said they had only come in search of some papers. I was too terrified to interfere."

"*Peste!* Well, Mademoiselle? When did your uncle know of this?"

"The same night. He came here in fairly good spirits. I was at first afraid to tell him for fear of upsetting him. When I did tell him he was much disturbed. He remained in this room a long time, and about eleven o'clock he said good-night to me, and told me not to be distressed. He had a letter in his hand then, and as I went to my room he left the house. I did not see him again until about five o'clock this afternoon, when he returned home, looking very wearied and anxious. That is all I can tell you." It was only by a violent effort that the young girl could prevent herself from breaking down.

"You have known your uncle a long time, Mademoiselle. Pardon me for asking you one question. Have you ever heard him recently say anything, or has he given you any impres-

sion by his acts, that would cause you to think he was contemplating some horrible deed—an act of traitordom?"

A flush of anger mantled Marguerite's cheeks. "No. No. Emphatically, no!" she said. "Strangely enough, he asked me a similar question himself this evening. And the last words he uttered, the last words he may ever utter, were, 'My country! My beloved!'"

"I am greatly puzzled," murmured Major Xavier in an undertone. "And yet, Mademoiselle Dupont, your uncle was a traitor, and my mission here to-night was to summon him to his country to answer that terrible charge."

"That he was a traitor is impossible," said Marguerite stoutly.

"He confesses it," said Major Xavier curtly.

"I cannot believe it."

"There is his letter," said the Major, taking an envelope from his pocket. Withdrawing the letter from its cover, he handed it to Marguerite. "Read it for yourself!" he said.

The young girl took the note with trembling fingers and read:—

"MY DEAR X,—For some time—ever since that terrible accident—I have considered our great scheme to be one which, however successful in the beginning, will ultimately bring

terrible disaster and misery—perhaps ruin itself —upon our beloved France. Knowing that I cannot convert you or any of our colleagues to this view, I decided to act upon the impulses which have for some time been endeavouring to guide me, and I have offered to give the English Government such information as I possess. This will, without bloodshed, or without involving France, put an end to everything. You may—no doubt you will—denounce me as a traitor, but the Most High knows I am actuated by a desire to serve my country, according to my lights. By-and-bye you will see this, and admit that I have acted rightly. I have asked the English Government a great sum for the secret, yet a sum far below its value to them. My large fortune has, as you know, been spent upon our project. The price of my present 'treachery' will go to reimburse my colleagues for the money they have spent upon the undertaking."

Marguerite handed the letter back to Major Xavier, offering no word of comment. The contents conveyed little meaning to her—her mind seemed to grow confused.

"That is the letter of a traitor," said the Major, holding the note in his hand, "or the writer is a man bereft of reason. But I am

perplexed to hear of this raid of the English police. It may be that there is a game of cross purposes. It may be that your uncle never wrote this extraordinary epistle. Let me examine it again!"

VIII.

It was now near ten o'clock, and the doctor and the nurse were expected every moment.

Marguerite left the library in order to see how her uncle was progressing—her hopes of his recovery were very faint, though she had not been informed by the doctor of the uselessness of hope. As the door was closed after her by Major Xavier, a knock and ring sounded from the hall, and Marguerite flew to the door.

Upon opening it she was startled to find—not the doctor, nor a nurse, but a stranger—a young man. He apologized for the lateness of his call, and said he had a few words to say to Mr. Thompson.

"He will not know me," said the young man, hurriedly, "but he will probably recognize my name, as I have had some correspondence with him. My name is Treherne."

Marguerite had no idea who or what the man might be. She told him in a few words that her uncle was dangerously ill. Mr. Treherne

seemed to suffer an acute pang of disappointment.

"Might I ask," he inquired, "if the doctor is with him? I should feel so much obliged if I could have a word with the doctor, if I cannot speak to Mr. Thompson. It is really a matter of vital importance to your uncle—I think I may venture to assume that you are his niece," he added, "that he should hear what I have to say at the earliest possible moment. I assure you, Mademoiselle," he went on, addressing her now in French, "that I shall not agitate your uncle in any way, if he should, as I trust he will, recover sufficiently to favour me with a few words. He will, I have no doubt, be pleased to see me."

Marguerite hardly knew what to say or to do. She reflected that with her uncle's friend, Major Xavier, in the house, there could be no harm in permitting the stranger to wait until the doctor returned. She then informed Mr. Treherne that a friend of her uncle had just arrived, and that he was welcome to remain until the doctor could decide if there was any hope of his seeing the sick man or of leaving a message for him.

Mr. Treherne expressed his gratitude in becoming terms, and Marguerite ushered him into the library.

As Mr. Treherne stood in the doorway, the young girl glanced uneasily at Major Xavier, who had raised his eyes from the letter he had been examining as the door opened.

"Let me introduce you, sir," she said, turning to Mr. Treherne, "to my uncle's friend—"

She faltered as she said this, remembering that the Major might not wish to be introduced to a stranger.

"The introduction, Mademoiselle, is unnecessary," said Mr. Treherne. "Major Xavier and I have met before."

"*Peste!*" exclaimed the Frenchman, rising to his feet. "What brings Monsieur Treherne *here?*"

Marguerite saw there was an awkwardness which might possibly be surmounted if she left her visitors to themselves, so she quietly closed the door upon herself and mounted the stairs to her uncle's bedroom.

The two men stood gazing at each other for a few moments, and then the Major resumed his seat, a sinister look upon his stern face.

"Perhaps it is an opportune meeting—even if it is one not coveted by either of us," said Mr. Treherne, taking a chair.

"Your business here is with our stricken friend, I presume?" said the Major.

"And yours?" asked Mr. Treherne.

"Be careful, sir!" said the Major. "We have crossed swords before. We may have to do so again."

"With willingness—if necessary," said Mr. Treherne. "But we must not start a new quarrel under the roof of a sick man."

"Your friend?" said the Major, half in inquiry, half sarcastically.

"Scarcely," said Mr. Treherne, laconically.

Each man was filled with curiosity to know what brought the other to "The Birches." The Major concealed his curiosity badly. Mr. Treherne concealed it admirably. For some moments there was silence in the room. The Major still held in his hand the letter which had stigmatized M. Camille Dupont a traitor.

"Monsieur Dupont is dangerously ill, I am told," said Mr. Treherne, breaking the silence. "Do you know if his illness is likely to prove fatal?"

"I am so informed. Will it upset your plans if he should die to-night?"

"Scarcely," said Treherne.

"Shall we continue to fence, or shall we speak what is in our minds?"

"As you please."

"Can we trust each other?" said the Major, with a short, hard laugh.

"Scarcely," answered Treherne, "but our suspicion one of the other should not be a bar to the exercise of that pleasant art—conversation."

"I am not a diplomatist—I do not traffic in words," said the Major. "My actions usually speak with sufficient force. Come! how much do you know?"

"That is a tall question."

"How much?"

"All that is worth knowing."

"Oh, what a foul crime!" exclaimed the Major, rising to his feet and pacing the room.

"Most foul," said Mr. Treherne, in a low voice, well under control.

"You should beware of angering me with mocking words, Monsieur. When you were an *attaché* at Paris, I must remind you that I held your life in my hands; and pray do not think now that you are protected in this house because you happen to be the Foreign Secretary's minion."

"I am able to take care of myself. But I would warn you, Major, that I have, like yourself, a temper, and that it may not be wise to insult me—even in my own country," he added sarcastically.

"What do you know?—give me a clue!"

"Why should I oblige you?"

"Because it may suit you—that is the only reason. If you knew all, you would not come here to treat with Dupont. You would have placed him under arrest."

"We manage these things differently in England. It is a habit of ours to smile at conspiracies, and to scoff at conspirators."

"Sir! But I will not accept a quarrel at your hands—now. What do you know? Give me your clue!"

The doctor and the nurse had arrived shortly after Mr. Treherne. Their presence in the house was not known to the two men in the library. Each had been too much concerned with his own affairs to overhear footsteps on the stairs.

"Reverse the position, Major, and just think how you would answer me if I propounded to you a similar question in Paris."

"I ask, not to know what information you may possess, but to ascertain if my friend is still a man of honour—if some huge trick has not been played—or if he is demented. That he has acted the part of a traitor should be impossible. I am aware you have stolen plans from this house; but do you seriously think we

should have allowed our real plans to be subject to the possibility of your discovering them? Your presence here to-night in the house of my friend is, I will admit, a cause of great trouble and grief and suspicion to me—not on account of what you may know, but on account of his honour. Come, Monsieur Treherne, tell me what you know. Tell me the worst!"

The Major sat down and wiped his damp forehead.

Mr. Treherne did not know with certainty what the great secret was. He suspected the nature of it, and could, if it was necessary, give a very plausible account of the project; but without possessing the actual information which he had come to buy at any reasonable cost, he was aware that he possessed nothing of any great value. His surmise might be wrong. Even if it was right he could not give satisfactory proof, unless by some happy chance, or at a vast expenditure of time, money, and ingenuity. Therefore he was still obliged to fence with Major Xavier, who was, as he shrewdly suspected, a prime mover in the plans which would, according to M. Camille Dupont, paralyze England.

"Your game is up, Major," he said. "It was a great scheme—bold, ingenious, wonderful.

But it required too much: it demanded such secrecy as cannot be obtained nowadays in civilized countries."

"What do you know?" reiterated the Major. He was beginning to suspect that Treherne was only playing a game of bluff, and he was angry with himself for having too readily assumed that the wily private secretary held the trump cards. "Nothing, or you would show your hand at once. Bah!" he exclaimed, "you are a worse diplomatist than myself—and that is saying a great deal."

"Shall I read a sentence for you—a sentence which I can explain—just to convince you of your error?" said Treherne, quietly.

"As you please, sir," replied the Major. "Something, no doubt, extracted from our bogus plans. What is it?"

"This!" said Treherne, taking a slip of paper from his pocket. Then he read aloud:

"*Thus, while the limbs are being attacked, and while the enemy is engaged in repelling these attacks, the great 'coup' can be dealt: it will paralyze the heart.*"

"Mere words," exclaimed the Major, with an upward wave of his hand. "Possibly a sentence copied from some *feuilleton*."

"The great *coup*," said Treherne, leaning

forward and gazing into the eyes of his companion, "can be dealt by means of G. H.!"

Major Xavier sprang to his feet at Treherne's words. At the same moment the door of the library was opened, and the doctor entered.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I understand that one of you is a dear friend of the master of the house?"

"Yes, yes!" said the Major. "I am one of his most intimate friends, sir. You are, I take it, his physician?"

The doctor nodded.

"What is the news of him?"

"He is dead."

"Great God!" exclaimed Major Xavier, throwing up his hands and sinking back into his chair.

"I am sorry to hear the bad news, doctor," said Mr. Treherne, nervously. "The suddenness of it makes one shudder. Of what did he die, pray?"

"Paralysis of the heart," replied the doctor.

IX.

BEFORE leaving "The Birches" Treherne satisfied himself that M. Dupont was really dead. Then he slipped quietly away, leaving Mademoiselle Dupont, Major Xavier, and the doctor in the library.

When he got into the roadway it was so dark that for some moments he could scarcely see his way. The doctor's brougham stood at the gateway, the coachman fast asleep on his box. After walking a few yards away from the gate he stood still. Noiselessly two men emerged from the hedge which bordered the roadway, and, approaching Trehene, one of them turned the eye of a dark lantern full upon the private secretary, and then shut off the light.

Treherne addressed the men by name, and instructed them to remain outside "The Birches" and keep watch upon the movements of the household. They were especially to have a close eye upon a tall military Frenchman. When he left the house one of the detectives

was to shadow him, while the other remained to keep guard over "The Birches."

"The French officer," he said, "is about five feet ten, slender, lithe and muscular. His moustache and imperial are turning grey. He has a scar on his left cheek; his eyes are steely grey, and his hair is cropped close. There are only two men in the house—the doctor and the Frenchman. You cannot confound the foreigner with the doctor. The latter is a stout, undersized man. If the French gentleman should happen to leave London you must follow him, and if he is about to embark for the Continent you must arrest him. I will have a warrant for you to-morrow. I fancy he will not leave England immediately; he will probably pay a visit to Hampstead. Report your movements to me privately and promptly."

The two detectives touched their hats as Mr. Treherne quietly said good-night. They peered at him through the darkness as he strode down the silent road.

"Rum job!" said one of the detectives to his comrade. "Mr. T. will be getting himself into hot water one of these fine days. I heard one superintendent say that there would be the deuce to pay if Mr. T.'s chief got wind of his little games."

"What's up here?" asked the other.

"Some French Invasion lay. They think the old chap who owns the place has invented some sort of flying machine. Those young men at the Foreign Office would believe any blooming yarn."

Treherne walked rapidly on. The road to "The Birches" was a by-road, and it was about a quarter of a mile from M. Dupont's house to the main road.

As he got half-way down the dark road he heard the sound of wheels, and, looking behind him, he saw the light of a vehicle coming along at a good pace. He halted as the carriage passed him, and recognized the doctor's brougham. He had an impulse to challenge it and have a talk with the doctor, but he felt he had matter in hand of a character which would not brook delay.

It was about half-past eleven when he broke in upon the main road. Here there was a hansom standing. As the young man approached it, the driver, who had been looking after his horse, mounted to his perch silently, and nodded as he got his brief instructions—"Whitehall."

Treherne was a young man who lacked neither courage nor determination, but as he

sat in the smooth-rolling hansom he was unable to make up his mind what his next step should be. When he had set out for "The Birches" he did not attempt to hide from himself that it was possible he might fall into some trap, but he felt that the risk was worth incurring. If he could come away with the key to M. Dupont's secret, he would have obtained something almost priceless. The meeting with Major Xavier had a disquieting effect upon him. The Major and he had a lively dread of each other, though in each case the dread took a different form. Apart from their original quarrel—the cause of which was a private matter—Treherne when in Paris knew that the Major was one of the most rabid Anglophobes in France. He was an open enemy, and therefore Treherne had regarded him merely as a vapourer, but his recent discovery of the Major's connection with Dupont was most disconcerting. The sudden death, too, of Dupont had strangely unnerved the young man, and after he had visited the bedroom and gazed upon the dead body he felt he would be utterly unable to tackle Major Xavier again. In fact, his only desire was to get instantly out of the ghastly house.

Treherne's intention as he seated himself in the hansom was to drive to Whitehall, to obtain

in that neighbourhood whatever help he might deem necessary, and to pursue his way to M. Dupont's house on Hampstead Heath, but as the cab rattled swiftly along his energy and his courage seemed to ooze out. He endeavoured to pull himself together. No account of M. Dupont's death could reach Hampstead that night; his visit there would be quite unexpected; it was possible he might swiftly discover some evidence that would confirm his suspicions. Next day might be too late. Major Xavier would probably visit the Hampstead house, and valuable clues would be lost. But all his self-prickings could not rouse Treherne. It soon became a struggle to keep awake. Physically and mentally he was tired out.

When he reached Westminster Bridge he instructed the cabby to continue the journey to his rooms in Victoria Street. He decided that he had better have something to eat and drink before proceeding further north, or before making any arrangements for a raid (if such should prove necessary) on "Heathview."

When he got to his rooms he found a telegram on his table. It was from his chief, summoning him to his lordship's country seat. Treherne sank into an easy-chair, endeavouring to decide what was best to be done. . . . .

When he awoke it was eight o'clock in the morning. He started up as he gazed at his watch, and cursed his ill-luck. He had barely an hour to freshen himself up and catch a train which would bring him in good time to his chief's country seat. As he stood up and drew up the blind of the window, his servant knocked at the door and informed him that a man had been waiting some time to see him.

The visitor proved to be one of the men he had left in charge of "The Birches."

"Sorry to say we've made a bit of a mess of it, sir," said the detective, sheepishly.

"How?" thundered Treherne.

"The Frenchman has given us the slip."

"Explain yourself."

'Well, sir, shortly after you left us on the roadway the doctor's brougham drove off. Of course we saw there was only one man in it."

"Of course," interrupted Treherne, angrily. "And naturally it was the wrong man. Well—continue your precious narrative."

"It was natural enough, sir," said the detective, "to suppose it was the doctor who was in his carriage, so we let it go. About ten minutes afterwards a short, stout gent came out to the gate and looked around him, surprised like. I went across to him and asked him if he

was looking for anything. He said his carriage should be at the door. Then I saw that I had been sold."

"You idiot!" fumed Treherne. "Of course the French officer was the one who drove off first. Couldn't you have examined the brougham as it drove off? It would surely be an ordinary precaution to have taken."

"We never suspected that it was anyone but the doctor. It was so precious dark we couldn't see, and we didn't like to flash a light on the doctor. The carriage with the Frenchman in it must have passed you on the by-road, sir."

"Yes. Curse it!" said Treherne. "But I didn't know I was leaving two boobies at 'The Birches.' I suppose you tried to clear up the matter—did you?"

"Yes, sir," replied the crestfallen detective. "In about a quarter of an hour the brougham came back. The coachman explained that he had driven off at once at the pull of the check-string, and that when he got home he found the brougham was empty. He seemed fearfully cut up, and the doctor slanged him to no end."

"I suppose your superior intelligence prompted you to make sure that it *was* the Frenchman who had left the house?"

"Oh, certainly, sir," said the detective,

brightening up. "We inquired there and found he had left just after yourself.'

"You're a precious pair of mugs," said Treherne. "When did you arrive here?"

"About an hour ago, sir, but your man wouldn't disturb you. I would have come earlier, but I was searching the neighbourhood of Blackheath during the night and in the small hours, but no trace could I find anywhere of the French gent."

"You will probably discover him at an address which I will now give you. And if you do find him and let him give you the slip again, I hope you will come to me for a reference whenever you are seeking for admission into a Home for Imbeciles."

X.

WHEN Treherne reached the country seat of his chief, he found the noble lord in no genial mood. Something had gone wrong at Berlin; there was a stupid blunder about an appointment with the Russian Ambassador; an important despatch to Constantinople had been lost or stolen.

"I am not a fault-finder, Mr. Treherne," said his lordship, "nor do I mean to suggest that any one man can be responsible for accidents occurring in different parts of the globe, but I really think I may fairly blame you for some of the trouble. At any rate, the mess about the Russian Ambassador is of your making."

Mr. Treherne was not prepared to offer any brilliant excuses, and his evident confusion irritated his chief even more than the blunders themselves.

"I know that I am myself to blame for much of your recent distractedness," he said, "for I suppose I did encourage you in some way about

this ridiculous French invasion business, which I am convinced is filling up all the loose corners of your brain."

"I fear we shall find it is not ridiculous," said Mr. Treherne.

"Perhaps," said his lordship, with a grim smile, "the conspirators have won you over to their side."

"May I trouble your lordship with a few words about the Dupont matter?" pleaded Mr. Treherne.

"Certainly not!" said his lordship. "You will kindly devote all your intellect and energies at present to an endeavour to put straight the matters I have just mentioned to you. I expect you will find the task will require your undivided attention. I have scribbled some memoranda there; you will do your best to get these into shape before dinner, if you please. It is lucky that the house is empty. To-morrow we shall be tumbling over each other's heels, I suppose."

About five o'clock Treherne was prepared to give a fairly good account of his day's work. Several telegrams had arrived during the day, but nothing concerning "Heathview." The Private Secretary was grateful for the respite, especially as he was extremely anxious to

avoid anything which would take his attention from the work he had in hand for his chief. He had rung for a cup of tea, and with the tea came a message that a gentleman wished to see him. He looked at the card and saw that the name scrawled in pencil upon it was that of the detective he had despatched to Hampstead in the morning. The man was shown to Mr. Treherne's room. He apologized for daring to disturb him at his lordship's residence, but he thought he had better chance the visit.

Treherne cut him short, and asked if he had picked up the French officer.

"No, sir," said the detective; "but just listen to me. Let me give you my report in my own way."

"Be it so. Well?"

"I got to 'Heathview' about ten o'clock. I struck a wrong part of Hampstead first, and was put out a bit. The house, as you know, sir, was quite out of the ordinary track."

"Was. Is, I suppose."

"No, sir. When I arrived there I found only a smoking ruin."

"Go on," said Treherne, huskily.

"About four thirty in the morning the place was seen to be in flames. It burned like a match, they say. When the Fire Brigade got

there it was near five o'clock, and the house was then only a ruin, nothing left but some of the outer walls. The worst of it is," continued the detective, "that whatever people were in the house must have been burned in their beds, for no one was seen to escape out of it, and no trace of any inmate has been discovered. I hung round there until about one o'clock, trying to hear some tidings of some of the unfortunate people, but nothing has been discovered. Then, after having a bit to eat, I went to your rooms. Not finding you there, and being unable to get any information from your man, I went on to the Foreign Office, and hung about there for a bit. Then I guessed you were likely to be with his lordship, so I thought it better to come down here and tell you, rather than to wire on chance."

Treherne did not heed the latter portion of the detective's report. He was wondering what it all meant. Major Xavier must have gone to "Heathview," and having destroyed all clues that existed there as to the great secret, he had, either accidentally or deliberately, set fire to the house.

"You have done your best, I suppose," he said, addressing the detective. "You must now devote all your time to discovering the

French officer who was at 'The Birches' last night. I will write some particulars about him, and give you some information which will, I fancy, put you on his track—that is if he is alive and hasn't left the country. . . . If he has slipped away," he added to himself, "there is no time to be lost. I must induce his lordship to give me his ear after dinner."

XI.

His lordship was in a complaisant mood after dinner, and readily assented to give his private secretary a hearing. It amused him to observe how seriously Treherne regarded the crazy Frenchman's mysterious mission. He listened patiently to a brief preamble about the possibilities of a French landing, but he was unable to take any deep interest in the statements of his private secretary until Treherne came to an account of his visit to "The Birches." From this point out his lordship plainly showed that he was interested. When Mr. Treherne paused, as he told of the burning of "Heathview," his lordship said :

"Well, what do you make of it all? I feel I am growing too old for unravelling plots or puzzles."

"I think I have got at the root of the mystery," said Treherne. "Amongst the variety of papers which were taken away from

'The Birches' was a sheet of blotting-paper upon which, amongst other things, was the impress of a letter or card. It is (as all the documents concerning Dupont's scheme are) in a peculiar cipher, but it will suffice to say that it reads, "G. H. $\frac{122}{156}$." The date in ordinary characters is added. It is the day before Dupont's first visit here. It struck me that as this was in the cipher, it bore upon the matter; and then it seemed odd that a Frenchman should use an English form of expressing his fraction, and also that a mathematician should put down a fraction which was further reducible. I came to the conclusion that the 156 was for some reason irreducible, and that the whole figure denoted some exact place. I need not tell your lordship that my conclusions were not formed all at one time, or that I arrived at them as easily as I am now trying to explain. G. H. was, I decided, a line; the length of it was a hundred and fifty-six—the reckoning being doubtless in metres or multiples of metres. The 122 denoted a point in the line. It might be that Monsieur Dupont was making a report to his colleagues, or that he had been making some calculations and had put down the result—possibly it was the secret he offered to sell your lordship."

"I am afraid his price for the two letters and

the fraction would be considered by the nation a trifle dear," said his lordship. "What did you say they were?"

"G. H. $\frac{122}{156}$."

"So far they convey nothing to me."

"Of course not. Your lordship has not followed the matter up as I have. In one of Dupont's secret memoranda there was a reference to a paper read before the Academy of Science in Paris in 1882. I obtained the volume to which Dupont's note pointed, and I will read a short extract from it:—'During 1875 and 1876 a geological study was made both on the English and French sides, comprising an exact contour of the bed of the Straits, and borings on land to find out the nature, thickness, inclination, and bearings of the strata, from which an approximate idea was formed as to whether they were impervious or not to water. Since 1879 experiments have been made on galleries of small sections, and on the tools likely to be called into requisition on a work of such exceptional importance.'"

"Stop a moment!" said his lorship. "Are you suggesting that Dupont's secret concerned a tunnel under the English Channel?"

"That is my suggestion, my lord. Not only a tunnel under the Channel, but a tunnel from

G. to H.—from Griz-nez or its neighbourhood to Hampstead!"

"This is preposterous!" said his lordship. "It would be a breach of all international law. Why, the French nation would scout such a scheme."

"Doubtless, sir. But it is a secret hidden from the French people and from the French Government—it is a private undertaking. When the tunnel is completed, *then* will the Government become aware of it, and armed with such a tremendous weapon France might eagerly provoke a war with us and use the secret machine the gods had given them."

"It is absolutely impossible," persisted his lordship. "No civilized State would tolerate such an act of trespass."

"All is fair in love and war, my lord," said Treherne. "I doubt if any French Government could resist such an overwhelming temptation. Would you mind looking at this map? A straight line from Hampstead to Griz-nez would be approximately 140 kilometres. Allowing for approaches at the French side, and for deviation on the line which might have been found necessary, we might fairly take it that the whole line would run to the 156 kilometres, and that of this 122 have been made,

taking the tunnel somewhere about Farningham. Of course I cannot tell where the deviations in the line occur—whether they are in the submarine portion or in Kentish soil."

"Are you really serious, Mr. Treherne?" asked his lordship.

"Perfectly, sir. That is the conclusion I have come to. Blackheath is meant to answer for one emerging place, and Hampstead Heath for the other. Granted a long night, and absence of all suspicion, what would there be then to prevent half a million French troops being flung, from north and south, upon London without one word of warning?"

His lordship recalled the words of Monsieur Dupont and did not offer to speak for some moments. He was, perhaps, more horrified at the idea of such a monstrous breach of international faith than at the idea of accomplishment of the design which Treherne suggested.

"I cannot believe it," he said, "but I am willing to admit that it is a matter which wants clearing up. How do you propose to go about this? To discover that it was a huge mare's nest would cover us with ridicule."

"No one on this side of the Channel but myself—to the best of my belief—can know or suspect anything. Dupont is dead. Major

Xavier has, no doubt, left the country, panic-stricken—that is if, in setting fire (as I presume he did) to 'Heathview,' he was not hoist with his own petard."

"But what do you propose? What examination can be made here?"

"None, I am afraid, sir. It would be impossible to decide where one might probe for the tunnel. In my opinion the work begins somewhere between Calais and Boulogne. M. Dupont's 'G.' points at Griz-nez. It is quite certain that the work has been carried on in the strictest secrecy. Possibly, in order to allay suspicion, a shaft has been sunk for a coal mine. Ordinary mining operations may be carried on. If Xavier is alive, no doubt the conspirators will have full warning. It will be no easy task that I have set myself, yet I believe I shall accomplish it. I know a good deal of the country which lies between Calais and Boulogne, and I think I could discover a suspicious spot without creating suspicion against myself."

"But recent events will certainly have aroused fear as well as suspicion across the Channel—that is, assuming that you have really discovered the secret of a very grave plot. Either you will learn nothing, or you will discover the great

secret—what is at the other side of the Styx. Take care you are not entering upon too dangerous an investigation."

"I am prepared to make the experiment," said Treherne with a smile. "If I fail, we shall have lost nothing, and we can then see what may be done at this side of the Channel."

"One thing is quite certain, and that is at the present stage no one else can be taken into confidence," said his lordship after a pause. "I cannot bring myself to believe that you are not the victim of some hoax; but if your surmise is right, the sooner the suspicion is converted into a certainty the better. . . . Though I hardly like to contemplate the complications which will ensue if you have discovered the secret which that unhappy Frenchman offered to disclose.

XII.

A FEW days passed before Treherne could get away from his official work. Meantime it was reported to him that M. Dupont had been buried, that his niece had left England for Paris, accompanied by the housekeeper, and that "The Birches" was deserted.

No tidings of Major Xavier had reached him. There had been an inquest held on some human remains discovered at "Heathview," and Treherne was inclined to believe that Xavier had perished in the ruins. Probably the Major thought the game was up, and had sought a melodramatic form of self-destruction.

On the morning of the fourth day after he had obtained his chief's consent to investigate *l'affaire Dupont*, Treherne found himself in a train bound for Folkestone. He had decided to cross over to Boulogne, and to pursue his investigations with Boulogne as a base. He had disguised himself simply but effectively. He had shaved off his heavy moustache, he wore a pair

of blue spectacles, and he had attired himself in a loud check suit, well padded. The slim Private Secretary was hardly distinguishable, except to a very keen eye, in the plethoric tourist. His intention was to look every inch the ideal Cockney tripper. He was travelling partly with the object of doing a walking tour through northern France, and partly with the hope of re-establishing his sight. He travelled third class. It was the first time he had adopted a disguise, and the first time he had ridden in a third-class carriage, and he did not easily accustom himself to the innovations. However, no one in the compartment in which he travelled to Folkestone paid any attention to him, and when he got on board the packet he was already feeling distinctly more at ease than he had felt on the platform at Charing Cross.

The packet was fairly crowded. It was a clear day, but the wind was strong and the sea rough. Treherne was a good sailor: he enjoyed the motion of the ship, and could even feel a distinct pleasure in observing how uncomfortable some of his fellow-passengers looked. He walked the deck until the boat was well away from Folkestone, using his sea legs admirably. But as the packet plunged her way across the Straits, her passage grew quickly

too rough for deck-walking, and Treherne found himself compelled to seek such protection as the bulwark afforded. He found that the most sheltered spot was one astern of the paddle-box; and here he leaned, alternately watching the foam from the paddles and the passengers who remained upon deck.

He was convinced he had discovered the secret which Dupont had offered to reveal, and it caused him a considerable sense of elation to think that he was the only Englishman, save one, who had possession of a clue to the most tremendous plot ever made for the destruction of England. Visions of rewards, of honours, of high place, danced through his brain, and a sense of thankfulness, too, possessed him that it should be allotted to him to save his country from a peril of such magnitude.

As the French coast began to loom, he leant upon the rail, gazing towards Griz-nez. He knew this part of the French coast well, and he was soon interested in picking out the bays and headlands and the villages which fringed the coast line. Suddenly he was aroused from his reverie by a deep voice:

"I pride myself, Monsieur, on being able to penetrate disguises. Yours is a very thin one."

Treherne had turned round swiftly and drawn

himself up to his full height, while he steadied himself by grasping the rail behind him.

"*Your* disguise is a good one, Major," said he. "I confess I should not have recognized you if you had not spoken—though, perhaps," he added, after a momentary pause, "I should not have forgotten that spot upon your cheek which marks where the point of my rapier once scraped an acquaintance with you."

Treherne was horribly disconcerted. Xavier had eluded him, and had now turned the tables upon him. The Major stood at his side, holding the rail with his left hand. There was an ugly steely glitter in his eyes. Both men were oscillating with the roll of the ship, and each was apparently anxious not to touch the other as the motion of the packet swayed them to and fro.

"You do well to remind me of the scar," said the Major. "I have not forgotten the origin of it, Monsieur. But what of it!" he continued, with a toss of his head. "You have been dogging me in your own country. Do you think you shall escape a similar handling in *my* country?"

"I am not interested in the matter," said Treherne.

"Are you not?" said the Major. "We shall

see. I know now how much you know. Your knowledge will avail you nothing. When I met you last you had me at a disadvantage. My friend Dupont's trouble had so upset me that I was no match for you. Now I am your match, and more."

Treherne found it difficult to recover his equanimity. He hardly knew what course he should adopt. He saw that it would be impossible to pursue his investigations in France with Xavier on his track. The memory of his chief's warning came full upon him, and he cursed himself for not having adopted some better precautions to avoid recognition. The sense of personal danger troubled him only slightly.

The Major was a born conspirator, a reckless, daring man, in whom the sense of personal fear had no place. He enjoyed his triumph over the Private Secretary. He was aware that Treherne's knowledge could upset his darling scheme; but even if Treherne was out of the way, others who had doubtless possessed a clue to the secret could destroy the project. The mere knowledge of its existence was in itself destruction. Six months more, and all would have been accomplished. Now all was lost.

Then a brilliant thought struck the Major.

"You have outwitted us, Mr. Private Secretary," said he; "and yet your knowledge has come too late, unless I take a leaf out of my dead friend's book and turn traitor too. *Peste!* Why should I not? One traitor makes many. What will you give me to know what *I* can tell?"

"Nothing," said Treherne. "I know all that I require to know."

"Why then this visit to France, and this disdisguise?" asked the Major.

"That is my affair, sir. But it is sufficient to say that it has nothing to do with plots or schemes of yours."

"Then," said the Major, "I will return to England by the next steamer, and offer my knowledge to your Government."

"That would not avail you much," said Treherne. "They would treat you as they treated Monsieur Dupont. And probably they would handle you a little more roughly than Monsieur Dupont was handled."

Treherne now saw that he was about to lose his great opportunity. If the villainous Frenchman sold the pass it would leave the Private Secretary out in the cold. Why should he not endeavour to treat with this conspirator, and bluff him?

"I am not uneasy about the handling I shall receive," said Xavier. "I am too old a soldier for that. But I can spoil your chances, Mr. Private Secretary."

"There you are again mistaken," said Treherne, with an air of boastfulness.

A sudden and violent lurch of the steamer here threw the two men into each other's arms. Treherne quickly and apprehensively disengaged himself, and he made up his mind that he would put a quick end to the *tête-à-tête*.

"How?" asked Xavier, steadying himself and endeavouring to accommodate his legs to the motion of the boat.

"Because," said Treherne, "no one but myself would understand you, or listen to you for a moment. I am the only one who knows anything of your tunnel, or who will know anything until it suits me to speak—and act."

"That is what *I* wanted to know!" said Major Xavier, a savage gleam of triumph in his eyes. "And your solitary knowledge shall go with you to the bottom of the sea."

Then, with scarce a movement that was visible, he plunged a dagger into Treherne's breast, and seizing him by the hips, he forced him over the rail. Treherne was utterly unprepared for the attack, and though the blow

stunned him, he clung to the Frenchman. Xavier had now lost control of himself, and using all his strength, and forgetful of his own peril, he succeeded in forcing Treherne clear of the ship's side. In doing so he overbalanced himself. The wounded man still clung to him desperately, and dragged Xavier with him into the tumbling sea.

The attack and its consequences had occupied such a short space of time that no one had been able to prevent the catastrophe. A sailor had rushed across the deck as the two men went over the side, but he succeeded only in clutching vainly for a moment the coat of the Major.

The packet was stopped as rapidly as possible, and in a few minutes a boat was lowered; but no trace of Treherne or Xavier was visible on the angry face of the waters.

THE END.

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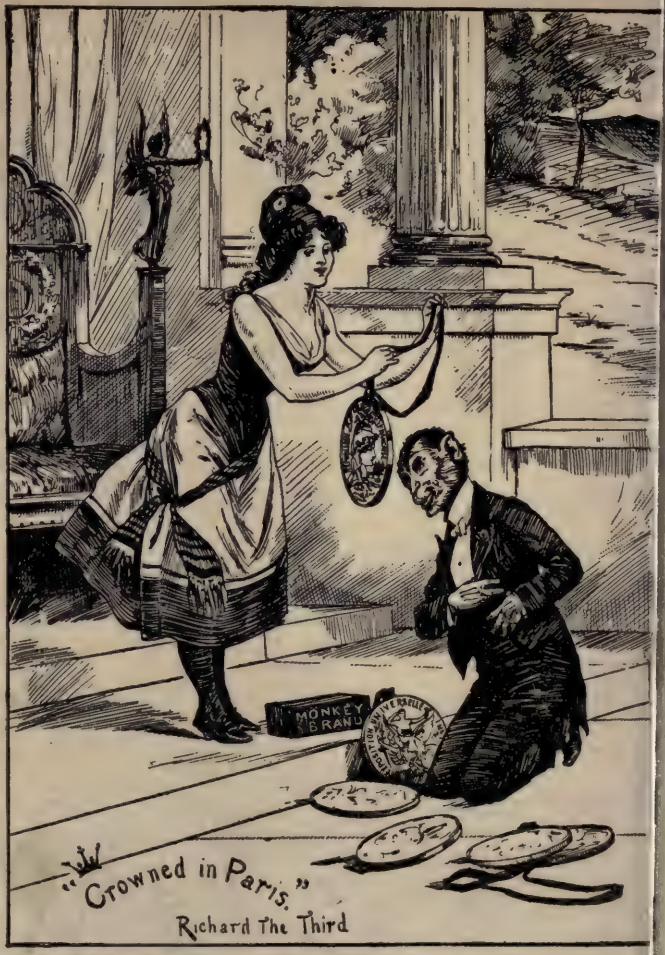

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